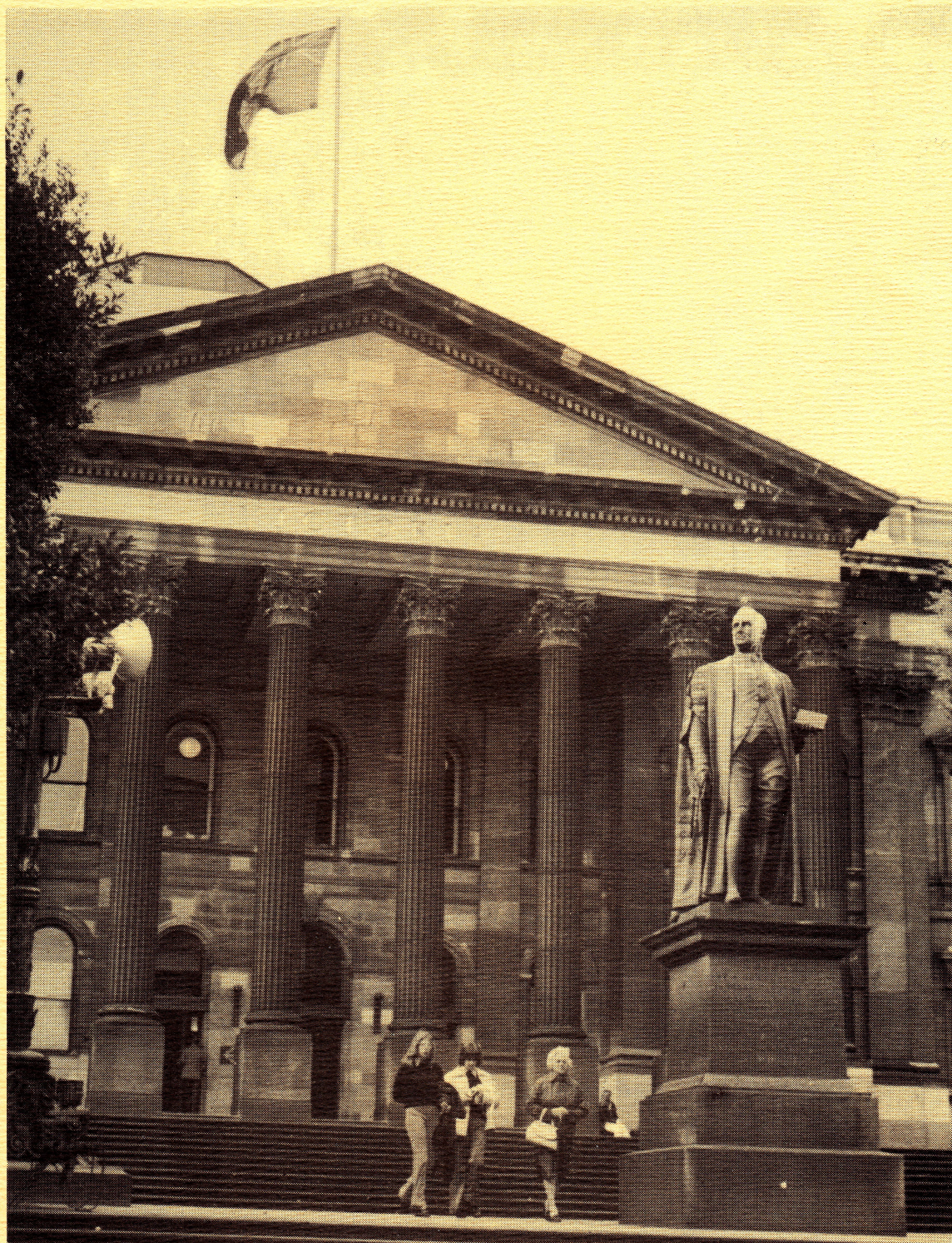


“Towards a Museum Policy for Victoria”

***A speech by the Hon. Norman Lacy, M.P., Minister
for the Arts and Minister of Educational Services,
delivered to the Victorian Branch of the Museums
Association of Australia on 18th May, 1981
(International Museum Day).***



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GENERAL

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address your association because it seems to me that the time has come for museums in Victoria to receive more support from the community, and that the members of this Association, representing the museum profession, need to be involved in determining the directions which a revitalized museums' programme should take.

My objective is to develop a comprehensive museums' policy for Victoria responding as effectively as possible to the obvious deepening interest by our society in local history and a quickening search for a 'sense of place' in both environmental and social terms.

There is no need for me to draw *your* attention to the evidence of the developing interest by our people in museums. Throughout this State, in fact throughout the nation, hundreds of small museums have been established in recent years by Local Governments, historical societies and private individuals. What's more, they have been, indeed are being, extraordinarily well patronised by local people and by tourists. Who could have predicted a decade or two ago that half a million visitors each year would pay to see Sovereign Hill, for example?

What we are witnessing and what we are participating in, is a substantial change in our cultural life which has genuine grass roots — involvement of our people.

It is important that Government and the museum profession should recognize and respond to this popular cultural movement. Even better if we can draw upon the professional expertise available and *anticipate* public needs and interests.

WHAT IS A MUSEUM?

At the outset we must make it clear what we are talking about. You will each have your own concept of what a 'museum' is, and it is likely that you wouldn't all agree exactly.

I intend to follow the international committee of museums' definition of a museum, i.e.

"A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution, in the services of a society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment."

However, I propose to qualify my use of this definition on two counts. There are many museums, including some in Victoria, which seek to make a financial profit in order to develop the public facilities further. Such organizations are certainly within our terms of reference. And secondly, many museums worthy of public support do not themselves engage in scholarly research although the material they hold and display may be viewed by scholars for that purpose. I propose to include them in our discussion also.

GALLERIES

It follows from that definition that art galleries are museums. It is curious that in Australia the word "gallery" is in popular use for art museums, and is considered to have a nice sound to it, while the word "museum" has a musty sound conveying the notion of oldness, quaintness, even irrelevance.

That is part of our problem. Australian art museums have generally received the public attention and support they deserve, while often museums have not. Perhaps the words have something to do with it. Perhaps we should call museums something else? Or perhaps, if we develop more lively, publicly active museum programmes, the word will lose its mustiness?

But whatever we call them, art museums or art galleries, Victoria can be proud of its achievements in this area. We have an outstanding major art gallery in Melbourne: an internationally-renowned art collection housed in a fine building, and a very lively public programme in the visual arts. The National Gallery of Victoria is still developing, but in anyone's terms we have already established there a great institution of international reputation.

We also have an excellent regional gallery system throughout the State, not equalled in any other State of this country.

These things did not come about by accident. The pattern was set during the boom days of the last century when Victorian society established a tradition of public support for the arts and many private collections were put together which became the basis of our outstanding metropolitan and regional galleries of today.

That tradition has continued in recent decades, with very substantial backing from the

Victorian Government committed to the development of a culturally rich society, and strong support from the private sector.

With that tradition and that support, the professional gallery staff have developed a first-rate art museum service in Victoria, with which, as the Minister currently responsible, I am proud to be associated.

MUSEUMS

Consequently, our attention must now be directed to the other side of the museum profession — the museums which deal with the social, technological and environmental aspects of Australian culture.

ROLE OF MUSEUMS

In its report on museums in Australia the Piggott Committee in 1975 stated that:

"We do not see museums as simply buildings where ancient objects are preserved and displayed. We saw museums as vital places of education, entertainment and research where facets of the daily life of past generations of Australians can be seen and where our heritage of old trades, crafts and skills can be displayed and practised."

Nevertheless it is a truism that the essence of a museum is a collection of objects. In the long term the stability and strength of a museum is determined by how well the collections are preserved and cared for. In the short term, the success and effectiveness of the museum as a public agency is determined by how successfully and effectively the collections are used.

The dilemma of museums is how to use the collections to good advantage while at the same time preserving them for posterity. That is a matter which involves much more professional training and judgement than I possess and I don't propose to develop that theme, although I do want to comment on our separate problems of preservation and the use of collections.

USE OF COLLECTIONS

Broadly speaking, according to our definition, collections are to be used for two major purposes — for *research* and for *education*.

The major museums of Australia, mostly museums of natural history or anthropology, were modelled on the British Museum which had as its primary objectives "the development and dissemination of knowledge", i.e. research and education.

It is at this point that the character of the individual museum is shaped. Does it have a major research function or is it solely an educational-entertainment organization?

RESEARCH IN MUSEUMS

It is only the large museums with larger, more significant collections which may have any major research role. Many museums in Australia were originally established as places of higher learning. This was the case with the National Museum of Victoria. The Australian Museum in Sydney was the first scientific research institution to be established in Australia, predating the university there by several years.

For various historical and social reasons the major State Museums suffered set-backs in the first half of this century and, although their traditions of scholarship were maintained, they tended to lose contact with the mainstream of research in the natural sciences.

Fortunately this trend is now reversed. I am pleased to report, for example, that the National Museum of Victoria has recently re-established its direct links with Melbourne University by formal affiliation. It had already affiliated with Monash University a year or so ago. These links will enhance that Museum's ability to use its magnificent collections in the pursuit of knowledge, and in training students in the natural science disciplines, an important aspect of its educational function.

Concerning the importance of research in museums the Piggott Committee stated:

"A museum cannot live without scholarship. Deprived of scholarship it can become a huckster's supermarket. Without the guidance of scholars, the collecting, the classifying and indexing, the storing, displaying and conserving of objects will each suffer. Without scholarship to guide every stage from collecting to indexing, the museum collections could never have served as foundations for the enormous platforms of knowledge they now support".

It is easy for those of us most concerned with the public educational aspects of museums to

underestimate the contributions museum research and museum collections have made to science and philosophy. Here is another subject on which you will be much better informed than I am. Accordingly I will not presume to inform professionals in this area of their own expertise by pursuing this point.

However, I do want to emphasize that the research function of our major museums is important in many ways. It may seem anomalous that a scientific research organization like the National Museum of Victoria is a responsibility of the Ministry for the Arts. The strong tradition and performance of the National Museum of Victoria in scientific research is fundamental to the State's natural science educational programmes as well as its scientific and resource management programmes. Also there appears to be a tendency these days once again to see science and the arts as human endeavours with much in common.

All this does not mean that every museum must be a research institution. But it does mean that scholarly research on collections should be a major component in the State's museum programme. The research output of the major museums will have a healthy influence on the museum profession as a whole in Victoria.

EDUCATION IN MUSEUMS

Whilst the public is largely unaware of the research function in museums because it is very much a behind-the-scenes activity, the public is much more familiar with the display-educational function of museums.

Most of the major Australian museums have developed comprehensive educational programmes for school classes. In fact our museums have been very innovative in this respect. The value of museum displays and real objects, especially those which can be handled, is inestimable as a tool in the educative process. This is a matter of special interest to me because of my other ministerial responsibility and I hope to see the museums' school programmes further developed in Victoria.

But it is a curious thing that, generally speaking, Australian museums do not seem to have fully appreciated the significance of their displays as educational devices.

Too often good display material is rendered ineffective because of poor display design and a lack of understanding of visual and other communication techniques. For that is what a display is — a device for communicating ideas, feelings and information.

There is an urgent need to improve the standard of museum display design in Victorian Museums including the major museums.

There is also an urgent need to identify the principal educational objectives of the displays.

You will probably know that a major review of educational strategy in Victoria has just been completed and a white paper on strategies and structures for education in Victorian Government schools published. To what extent do Victorian museums' exhibition-education programmes take account of the objectives identified in that paper? I fear that the answer is very little.

Having responsibilities for both education and museums, I have been seeking to promote better liaison between officers of the Education Department and the State Museums, and more effective use of the museums for educational activities by both schools and the general public. Of particular concern has been the divided responsibility of education officers in museums who are secondees from the Education Department, and the lack of control museum administrations have over such officers as a result.

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

The white paper proposed that the basic aims of education in Victoria should be to provide the fullest opportunity for people to:

"Reach an understanding of themselves in society; develop to their highest level of intellectual, emotional and social competence; achieve socially responsible self-direction; and build an abiding sense of community throughout our society."

What role can museums play in this? I submit that they *can* play a very important role because they hold collections of objects which, in a very direct way, represent the cultural and scientific record of our people and of the world we live in.

These objects, wisely and effectively displayed or used, can be a powerful medium for enhancing our people's sense of place and sense of identity. This is the most significant and unique

feature of museums as educational agents. They possess real objects to inspire and excite the imagination and stir the curiosity about the achievements of the past and the possibilities of the future.

In this context I draw your attention to the corporate goal recently established by the National Museum of Victoria Council, which reads as follows:

"To develop among the people of Victoria an enhanced sense of place, sense of cultural continuity and history, sense of cultural richness, and sense of the family and dignity of humans."

TOURISM

So far I have spoken of the objectives of museums as being directed principally toward the local people, helping them to achieve that "sense of place".

But museums are also foci of information and feelings about a place which can be very attractive to visitors — let's call them tourists. It has become commonplace for tourists to seek out the museum as a first place to visit in a city or district, because it is likely to present an encapsulated summary view of the place, its people, its resources and history.

A network of regional museums in metropolitan and country centres, complementing the major central museums in the city, would make a significant contribution to Victoria's tourist industry and, hence, to the State's economy.

I have outlined the principal roles which museums could or should play in the community. Regretfully, it must be admitted that the reality falls far short of the ideal, and of the potential. Our museums are richly endowed with priceless collections in many fields but there are many problems.

There is a universal problem in Victorian museums with providing sufficient and appropriate storage for the collections not on display, to the extent that valuable material is inaccessible and at risk of damage and deterioration.

There are virtually no conservation facilities for our museums. Even our two major museums employ only one conservation officer. Valuable specimens needing stabilization or restoration treatment remain neglected.

There is no inventory of our Victorian heritage of artefacts — we hardly know what we own and hence are not in a position to determine priorities for a conservation programme even if we had the facilities.

We have no programmes of temporary and travelling museum exhibitions in this State. Our museums are unable to host visiting exhibitions from other States or overseas because their exhibition galleries do not meet the required standards of environment and security. In fact we have at this stage no cohesive policy for museums in Victoria.

POLICY

It can be argued that injection of more funds into the system will solve these problems. It is indisputable that our museums are under-funded. But funds alone will not produce a good museum programme. We urgently need a *policy*.

In the current difficult economic times it is essential that we have first a comprehensive policy, and then a plan for the progressive up-grading of the Victorian museum system to guide us in spending wisely and effectively such funds as we can muster, whether they come from Government or private sources. What mechanisms exist or can be set up to develop a Museum's Policy for the State?

COUNCILS

There are two museum councils charged by their State Acts of Parliament with responsibility, not only to manage their institutions, but also to advise the Minister on matters concerning museum services throughout Victoria. These are the Council of the Science Museum of Victoria and the National Museum of Victoria Council.

In addition there is the Victorian Council of the Arts which is responsible for advising the Minister on matters relating to the Arts, which of course overlaps to some extent with the interests of the museums.

The National Museum Council is responsible for the Natural Sciences, i.e. Zoology and Biology, and for Anthropology. The Science Museum Council is responsible for applied science and technology.

From my point of view, as the responsible Minister, there are some problems with this as a policy-making structure:

1. The two Museum Councils are independent bodies operating under separate legislation and they are likely to have independent views on important policy matters.
2. The charters of the two museums were established long ago when applied sciences, natural sciences and the arts were perceived as very distinct disciplines. Today there is a movement throughout our culture to re-integrate them. Especially in the museum education field it is difficult to deal with environment as distinct from human technology, or technology other than in a human history context. I accept the proposition that the laws of physical science and the biological and geological laws of the life and earth sciences are sufficiently different, requiring different expertise, that they warrant separate treatment at some level.

But I believe that it is even more important educationally to present to the public an integrated view of these subjects — the place of man and his technology in nature, of the cultural, including technological, adaptations of *homo sapiens* to his physical and biological world.

3. There are some aspects of human history in Australia, namely European and other non-aboriginal history, which are beyond the present scope of either of the two major State Museums. Although it must be admitted that, if "anthropology" is defined literally as the study of man irrespective of race, then the National Museum Act gives responsibility for social history, minus applied science and technology, to that Museum.
4. The two major State Museums have it written into their Acts that they are to advise the Minister on the development of regional museums in their respective fields. But most small museums do not specialize in either natural history or technology.

They tend to be generalized museums, and if they specialise in anything it is usually in the field of colonial or social history for which neither of the big museums has much expertise.

Which of the two major museums should be made responsible for advice on and management of a regional museums programme? Or should there be a third museum organization established to take this on?

5. As far as the State-operated museums are concerned, is it economically effective to have duplicated staff and facilities for education services, exhibitions, libraries, and technical services such as photography and publications?

Consideration of all these matters has led me to conclude that a rationalization of the two major museums is needed.

I don't believe that the solution is to create a third independent organization to deal with social history or with a regional museum programme. That would only exacerbate the difficulty in achieving integration of the educational programmes.

The solution must be to rationalize the two existing organizations with as little disruption as possible.

There are two possible ways to achieve this.

AMALGAMATION

The simplest way to do it would be to amalgamate the two councils and their institutions and restructure within the amalgamation. That would achieve single-line policy advice, maximum administrative economy, maximum potential for an integrative educational programme, and a simple administrative structure for managing a regional museums' programme.

However, it would require the repeal of three Acts of Parliament and the introduction of new legislation. Also the two councils are concerned that it may, if too hastily embarked upon, result in undesirable dilution of the specialist fields of applied science and natural science.

I am persuaded therefore that, for an interim period at least, we should seek to achieve the same objectives by co-ordination rather than by integration.

JOINT CONSULTATIVE BODY

Consequently, I have established a joint consultative body to be known as The Museums Development Committee with representatives from each of the two councils and with representatives of the Minister. The Museums Development Committee will consider such matters

as how to achieve a rationalization of services, how to establish and manage a regional museum system and a Museum Resources Service, the development of the existing City Museum complex in the interests of both institutions, and the development of programmes in fields of mutual interest such as social history. The Museums Development Committee will also join with a working party of the Victorian Council of the Arts to develop a comprehensive museums' policy for Victoria.

The Museums Development Committee has already met in an interim form several times and is proving to be very effective, with the two councils working together in a spirit of mutual interest.

MUSEUM RESOURCE SERVICE

The Museums Development Committee has already made detailed recommendations on suggestions I put forward for the establishment of a Museum Resource Service. Eventually this Service will provide advice and services on conservation, curating and exhibitions, to small museums. I am pleased to announce here that this recommendation is accepted by the Government. Staff will be appointed to the Ministry for the Arts, based in the City Museum complex, and supervised by the Museums Development Committee. I hope that the initial appointments can be made in the very near future.

The first task of this unit will be to review the small metropolitan and country museums to determine the scope and condition of their collections, their staffing and capacity to develop and care for their collections, their administrative structure, and the question of legal protection of the collections against improper disposal or abuse, protection which material worthy of a place in the Victorian heritage must deserve.

The results of that review will become the basis of a museum policy on the conditions under which the Government funds may be allocated to support small museums, and on the difficult question of priorities.

CONSERVATION LABORATORY

Ultimately it is my intention that the Museum Resource Service should include a well-staffed and well-equipped conservation laboratory which will provide conservation services to the two major museums and the small museums as well.

REGIONAL MUSEUM PROGRAMME

It is too early yet to say much about a State-wide regional museum network in Victoria. It will take some time for policy to be developed on this matter.

We have a vision of a network of regional museums in parallel to the regional galleries. To what extent this might be based on existing museums, to what extent Government funds will be necessary, and to what extent the major museums will be involved, is yet to be considered.

But the vision is a very attractive one. We see a regional museum centre presenting an encapsulated view of the region, its natural environment and wildlife, natural resources, social structure, social history, and industrial development.

Each centre will strive to show the unique character of the district. I believe that such centres will become foci for local pride and the development of that 'sense of place' which is so important to any community. They will also become important tourist attractions. We see them also as local centres for various cultural activities such as natural history societies, historical societies, and craft societies.

Clearly a programme like this is a long-term objective but I am anxious that it should be initiated now.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY MUSEUM COMPLEX

Finally I want to comment on the situation of the Science and National Museums.

For many years the Victorian Government has hoped to provide a new building for the National Museum allowing it to develop to its full potential, and allowing the Science Museum to occupy the whole of the existing buildings in the Swanston Street — Russell Street complex.

Most recently it was planned that, together with a new State Library, a new National Museum would be built on part of the Victoria Market site, and that this would happen after the completion of the Arts Centre.

But the costs of those two buildings would be vast and the Government is in no position to undertake such an expensive buildings programme in the foreseeable future.

After consultation with the museum councils I have prepared the way for the Government to adopt a different approach. That is to leave the National Museum where it is, sharing the existing complex with the Science Museum after the Library has moved out.

This will involve completing the historic buildings and renovating the existing galleries to fit them for the joint museum purposes.

As you will know, there are three sections of the existing complex which were never built; ugly brick walls with flapping metal tie-straps face into Russell and Latrobe Streets. Construction of those three wings may very well provide sufficient new laboratory, office and storage space to solve the National Museum's most desperate space problems. It would also free several halls for public exhibition space. I have provided funds to commission architects for a feasibility study of this proposal. If their conclusions are favourable I will recommend to the Cabinet that this construction programme should proceed as soon as funds permit as the next major building project of the Ministry for the Arts. That is likely to be immediately after the Arts Centre is completed in 1983.

Later, after the new Library is built and that institution has vacated the premises, the older buildings will be renovated, allowing the Museums to take over the 18,000 square metres the Library currently occupies.

I am conscious of the fact that, although this development programme provides for sufficient storage and laboratory space and some increase in the space for new public exhibitions, it falls a little short of the original aspirations of both Museums in terms of the space that will be available for a comprehensive modern public programme. While the proposal will result in an increase in space to the Museums from 14,000 square metres to approx. 45,000 square metres or 200%, it will mean a diminution of expectations for space by 25% from approx. 60,000 square metres.

EXHIBITION CENTRE

Consequently it has been suggested that in addition a major new museum exhibition centre should be built on another site, preferably on the opposite side of Swanston Street.

The idea is that this should comprise a series of exhibition halls depicting man and nature in our region, and be set up and managed jointly by the Science and National Museums.

This is an exciting proposal and, in principle, I support it strongly. But I have to say that I am not confident that such a project would be financially feasible for many years. That is unless the funds for it come from other sources.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to say again that I am convinced that a strong museums' system in Victoria can become a valuable cultural force in the community.

I am confident that the existing museums in Victoria, with their magnificent collections and core of experienced and talented staff, form a healthy basis for the strong museums' system envisaged.

And I am determined that, during my term as Minister, the necessary policies and plans will be developed and implemented.

I invite you as members of the museum profession to join with me and my Ministry in getting on with the job. Your input will be both welcome and necessary.